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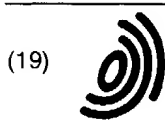
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(54) Method and apparatus for producing color images

(57) A method and apparatus for creating color images are effective to reduce two-color moiré. The techniques apply a non-periodic halftone operation (152) to the color separation for a less perceptible color (e.g., yellow) and periodic halftone operations (150, 154, 158)

to color separations for more perceptible colorants (e.g. cyan, magenta and black). The techniques prevent the formation of periodic structures due to the interaction of the yellow colorant with one of the other colorants (e.g., cyan or magenta).

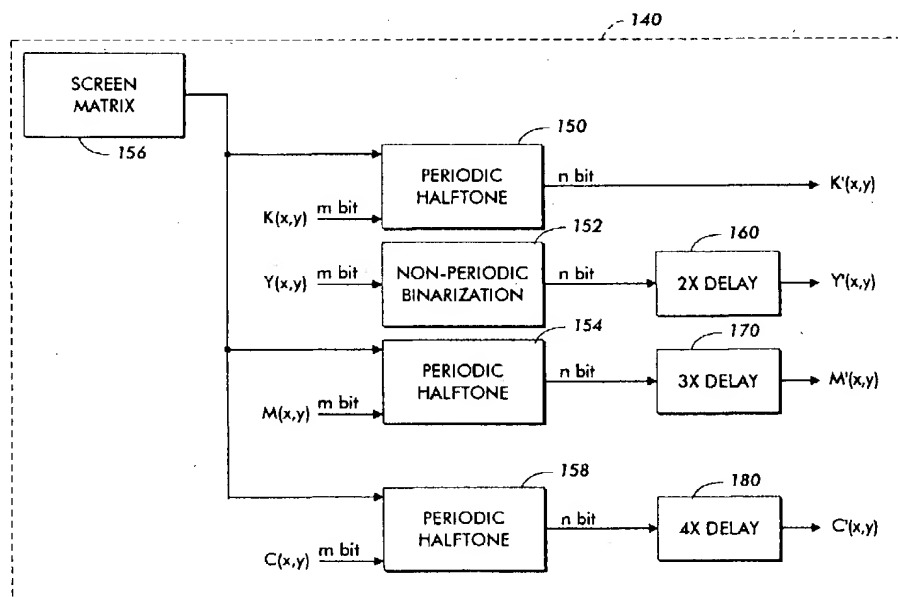


FIG. 2

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Description

This invention relates generally to production of color images.

The present invention provides techniques useful for halftoning the color separations of a digital color document so as to significantly reduce printing artifacts that result from the interactions of two of the printing colors - referred to as two-color moiré.

Full color in printed documents is the result of rendering, in combination, a limited set of marking colors over a small area, in densities selected to integrate to a desired color response. This rendering is accomplished in many printing devices by reproducing separations of the image, where each separation provides a single primary color of varying density. When combined together with other color separations, the result is a full color image.

In the digital reproduction of documents, a color separation is conveniently represented as a monochromatic bitmap or bytemap, which may be described as an electronic image with discrete image signals (hereinafter, pixels) defined by position and density. The density of a color at any particular pixel position is represented as one of a number of possible states or levels. When more than two levels of density are used in the description of the image, the levels are often termed "gray", indicating that they vary between a maximum level and minimum level, and without reference to their actual color. Most printing systems have the ability to output or render an image with a small number of levels, typically two, although more output levels are possible. Common input devices including document scanners, digital cameras and computer image generators, however, are capable of describing an image with a substantially larger number of gray levels (e.g., 256 levels is common), although larger and smaller numbers of levels are also possible. An image initially described with a large set of levels typically must be describable using a smaller set of levels, in a manner that captures the intent of the user, in order to allow rendering of the image as a hardcopy output. In digital printing of color documents this is accomplished by reducing the relatively large number of input levels in a color separation to a smaller number of output levels. The multiple color separations are then combined together at printing, for example in an image-on-image printing system, to yield the final color print. Commonly, color documents are formed using cyan, magenta, yellow and black colorants although alternative or other combinations of colorants may also be used.

For purposes of simplicity the following discussion will consider the case where the number of output levels (n) is two (i.e., a binary printer). As noted above, however, n may be greater than two for a gray level printing process.

In printing color documents, obtaining the desired density of a particular color is accomplished by halfton-

ing, where separation density variation is represented by marking greater or fewer numbers of ON pixels (binary) in a distinct area of a separation. In a halftoning method known as dithering or screening a value representing the density of each color separation pixel of an array of separation pixels within the area is compared to one of a set of preselected thresholds (i.e., stored as a dither matrix) and the repetitive output pattern generated by this comparison is considered a halftone cell as disclosed, for example, in US-A-4 149 194. The effect of such an arrangement is that for an area where the image density of the color separation lies between the maximum and minimum levels, some of the thresholds within the dither matrix will be exceeded while others will not. In the binary case, the separation pixels or cell elements for which the thresholds are exceeded might be printed as a maximum colorant value, while the remaining separation pixels are allowed to remain white, dependent on the actual physical quantity described by the data.

While widely accepted as a method for rendering color prints of digital images, dithering creates problems where the repeating pattern of the screen, when superposed over similar repeating patterns in the multiple color separations, can cause moiré or other artifacts.

US-A-5 394 252 discloses that there are always 2-way moiré patterns between the color separations, but that the angles are often chosen to maximize the frequency of the moirés, resulting in the "rosettes" noted in magnified color halftones. This is true of both analog (photographic) and digital systems. US-A-5 394 252 further discloses interaction of the three most perceptible colors, cyan, magenta and black, and the elimination of three-color moiré amongst such colors using a non-periodic screen. US-A-5 394 252 further discloses that error diffusion, because it operates on a pixel-by-pixel basis, is non-periodic, mitigating the problems of moiré.

The present invention addresses the problem of reducing two-color moiré, particularly in yellow-cyan and yellow-magenta regions where the two screens are separated by an angle of approximately 15° (degrees). The present invention further builds on the recognition that the yellow colorant is typically the least perceptible of the primary marking colors. When rotated dot halftone screens are employed to render the three or four (three colors plus black) color separations, the interaction between two of the color separations can cause periodic artifacts, particularly when the angle between the rotated screens is shallow, such as about 15° . This periodic artifact, referred to as two-color moiré, can be caused by (a) significant overlap of the absorption spectra of the two colors or (b) a physical interaction between the dots of the two colors, resulting, for example, in a breaking-up of magenta or cyan halftone dots when placed or positioned over or on top of a yellow halftone dot.

US-A-4 149 194 discloses that the angle of the halftone screen can be changed to generate screen patterns which do not strongly beat visually against each

other, thereby reducing the objectionable moire. Noted as particularly critical are the angles between the most prominent colors, cyan, magenta and black. A typical arrangement of rotated screen angles is 90° (or 0°), 15°, 45°, and 75° for yellow, cyan, black and magenta, respectively.

US-A-5 225 915 discloses that the addition of noise or enhancement of inherent noise can mask moire. However, such schemes inherently alter the accuracy of the image.

In one aspect of the invention, there is provided a method for producing multiple color images, comprising: obtaining image signals defining color separations that describe a multiple color image, the image signals indicating optical density with m levels; the color separations including first and second color separations indicating optical densities of first and second colors respectively; performing non-periodic reduction on the image signals defining the first color separation to produce a non-periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the first color separation with n_n levels, where m is greater than n_n ; performing periodic reduction on the image signals defining the second color separation to produce a periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the second color separation with n_p levels, where m is greater than n_p ; and providing an output pattern for each of the color separations to an image output device to cause the image output device to produce a version of the multiple color image; the output patterns including the non-periodic output pattern and the periodic output pattern; characterised in that the first color is less perceptible than the second color.

In another aspect of the invention, there is provided an apparatus for producing multiple color images, comprising: a source of image signals defining color separations that describe a multiple color image, the image signals indicating optical density with m levels; the color separations including first and second color separations indicating optical densities of first and second colors respectively; processing means for performing reduction on the image signals, the processing means performing non-periodic reduction on the image signals defining the first color separation to produce a non-periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the first color separation with n_n levels, where m is greater than n_n ; the processing means performing periodic reduction on the image signals defining the second color separation to produce a periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the second color separation with n_p levels, where m is greater than n_p ; and an image output device for producing a version of the multiple color image in response to a set of output patterns that includes an output pattern for each of the color separations; the set of output patterns including the non-periodic output pattern and the periodic output pattern; characterised in that the first color is less perceptible than the second color.

The present invention can be implemented in an apparatus for creating multiple color images, including: an

image-on-image printing system capable of rendering each of the multiple colors with n output density levels in superposed positions on a substrate to produce selected colors; a source of image signals describing a multiple color document with a plurality of color separations, each image signal representing optical density with one of m levels, where m is greater than n ; a processor for preparing color documents for printing, said color documents each including a plurality of color separations, each color separation represented as a set of image signals describing optical density using m density levels; a non-periodic halftone processor connected to said source of image signals, said non-periodic halftone processor reducing the number of levels m representing optical density in a first color separation to a number of levels n_n representing optical density, said halftone processor generating a non-periodic pattern thereby; a periodic halftone processor connected to said source of image signals, said periodic halftone processor reducing the number of levels m representing optical density in at least one additional separation to a number of levels n_p representing optical density, said periodic halftone processor generating a periodic pattern thereby; and means for directing signals processed at the non-periodic halftone processor and the halftone processor to said printer to print said processed color image.

The present invention can also be implemented in a method for creating multiple color images on a printing system capable of rendering each of the multiple colors with n output density levels in superposed positions on a substrate to produce selected colors, including: receiving, from a source of image signals, image signals describing a multiple color document with a plurality of color separations, each image signal representing an optical density of a particular color with one of m levels, where m is greater than n ; processing the image signals of a first color separation with a non-periodic halftone processor connected to said source of image signals, to reduce the number of levels m representing optical density in the first color separation to a number of levels n_n representing the optical density, and generating a non-periodic output pattern thereby; processing the image signals of at least one additional color separation with a periodic halftone processor connected to said source of image signals, to reduce the number of levels m representing optical density in the at least one additional separation to a number of levels n_p representing the optical density, and generating periodic patterns for the at least one additional color separation thereby; and directing signals processed at the non-periodic halftone processor and the periodic halftone processor to said printer to print the processed color image.

The present invention can also be implemented in an image-on-image printing system for creating multiple color images, including: an image input terminal acting as a source of digitized image signals, the digitized image signals describing a multiple color document with a plurality of color separations, each digitized image sig-

nal representing the optical density of a pixel for each of a plurality of colors; an image processing unit for preparing the digitized image signals for printing as a color document wherein the color document is rendered using a plurality of color separations in superposed registration and where each color separation is represented as a set of image signals describing optical of the pixels, said image processing unit further including a non-periodic halftone processor, said non-periodic halftone processor reducing the number of levels representing optical density in a first color separation to n_n levels, said halftone processor generating a non-periodic pattern thereby, and a periodic halftone processor, said periodic halftone processor reducing the number of levels representing optical density in two additional color separations to n_p levels, said periodic halftone processor generating a periodic pattern thereby; and means for directing signals processed at the non-periodic halftone processor and the periodic halftone processor to said printer to print said processed color image.

The invention addresses a basic problem in presenting full color images--when two primary colors are presented using periodic patterns or structures, each for a single color, the patterns or structures interact to produce a distinctive perceptual artifact, referred to as two-color moire. Two-color moire is a particular problem in color image printing.

The invention provides a technique that alleviates the two-color moiré problem. The technique combines periodic and non-periodic reduction, with the color separation for a less perceptible color being reduced non-periodically and the color separation for a more perceptible color being reduced periodically. The technique can be implemented with a wide variety of non-periodic or quasi non-periodic reduction techniques, including error diffusion, stochastic or random screening, pulse density modulation, and other non-periodic halftone processes. The technique can similarly be implemented with any appropriate periodic reduction technique, including dithering and other periodic halftone processes.

In comparison with US-A-5 394 252, the technique is advantageous because appropriate screen angle differences can be maintained between periodic color separations for more perceptible colors such as cyan, magenta, and black, thus avoiding two-color moire between them, while two-color moire does not occur between any of the more perceptible colors and the non-periodic separation for a less perceptible color, such as yellow. Further, the technique can be implemented with only one non-periodic color separation, reducing perception of any undesirable artifacts associated with non-periodic separations.

More generally, the technique is advantageous because it is simple compared to other approaches. In addition, it can be used to expand process latitude for printing systems employing image-on-image marking technology. The techniques of the invention are advantageous because they permit the efficient processing of

color separations using any of a number of possible quantization or reduction techniques. As a result of the invention, color printing systems will produce higher quality images by minimizing the perception of moire and other artifacts resulting from structural interactions between two color separations, one of which is a less perceptible color separation such as yellow.

The invention will now be described, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a data flow diagram depicting the flow of data in an image processing system and an associated digital printing system;

Figure 2 is a schematic illustration of the components of a halftoning circuit;

Figures 3 - 10 are examples of color separations for the same portion of a color image; and

Figure 11 is an illustration of an image-on-image printing system.

The term "data" refers herein to physical signals that indicate or include information. When an item of data can indicate one of a number of possible alternatives, the item of data has one of a number of "values". For example, a binary item of data, also referred to as a "bit", has one of two values, interchangeably referred to as "1" and "0" or "ON" and "OFF" or "high" and "low".

An "image" is a pattern of physical light. To "render" or "print" a color image is to mark a substrate with at least two and preferably three or more colorants (e.g., inks, toners, pigments, etc.) so as to form a color image from the visual integration of the colorants. As used herein, the primary marking colors may include cyan, magenta, yellow and possibly black. However, it is well understood that the pigments or colorants employed to produce the full color image on a substrate may vary. Accordingly, the term "least perceptible colorant" will be employed herein to represent the single colorant of the plurality of colorants that is least visually perceptible by an observer. Typically, the least perceptible colorant will be yellow, however, there is no intention to limit the application of aspects of the present invention to only yellow colorants.

A "pixel" is the smallest segment into which an image is divided in a given system. Each pixel value is a bit in a "binary form" of an image, a gray scale value in a "gray scale form" of an image, or a set of color space coordinates in a "color coordinate form" of an image, the binary form, gray scale form, and color coordinate form each being a two-dimensional array defining an image.

As used herein, "optical density" or "density level" or "density" means a measure of the lightness, brightness, or intensity of a color at a location in an image. For example, if an image is described by a body of data that includes an 8-bit value for each location or pixel of the image, each pixel value would be capable of indicating any of 256 density levels, ranging from 0 to 255; but

if an image is described by a body of data that only includes a single bit value for each pixel, each pixel value would be capable of indicating only two density levels, 0 and 1.

A "color separation" is used herein to mean one of a set of separations that together describe an image. Each separation is a body of data that indicates, for each location or pixel of the image, an optical density of one color from a set of colors that can be used to print, display, or otherwise present the image. Conventional sets of three color separations often include separations for three non-black, non-white colors, such as cyan, magenta, and yellow (C, M, Y) or red, green, and blue (R, G, B); a set of four color separations may include separations for cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (C, M, Y, K). The color separations can be "superposed" to present the image, meaning that the densities indicated by all the separations are presented approximately in alignment.

"Reduction" is an operation on data describing an image that reduces the amount of data, such as by reducing the number of density levels or by reducing spatial resolution. Reduction techniques can be divided into "periodic reduction" in which an operation is performed at periodic intervals across an image and "non-periodic reduction" which includes all other reduction techniques. Conventional dithering is an example of periodic reduction. Non-periodic reduction techniques include, but are not limited to, error diffusion, stochastic or random screening, pulse density modulation, and other non-periodic halftone techniques. A "non-periodic output pattern" simply means a pattern produced by non-periodic reduction; a non-periodic output pattern may include some repetition. Similarly, a "periodic pattern" means a pattern produced by periodic reduction.

A first color is "less perceptible" than a second color if, to a human with normal color vision, the perceptible difference between the highest and lowest available optical densities of the first color is less than the perceptible difference between the highest and lowest available optical densities of the second color. For example, when printing with typical cyan, magenta, yellow, and black colorants, each of which has a distinct level of visual perceptibility, yellow is less perceptible than any of cyan, magenta, and black.

An "image input device" or "image input terminal" (IIT) is a device that can receive an image and provide an item of data defining a version of the image. A "scanner" is an image input device that receives an image by a scanning operation, such as by scanning a document.

An "image output device" or "image output terminal" (IOT) is a device that can receive an item of data defining an image and provide the image as output. A "display" is an image output device that provides the output image in human viewable form. The visible pattern presented by a display is a "displayed image" or simply "image".

Referring to Figure 1, depicted therein is a data flow diagram for a reprographic or printing system 120. Sys-

tem 120 preferably receives a digital document image 130 generated from one of a plurality of image input terminals 122, including but not limited to scanner 124 for digitizing hardcopy original document 125, a storage device 126 or a computer workstation 128. Once represented in a digitized format, preferably a multilevel signal (m) for each of three colors (e.g., 24-bit (8 bits/separation)), the data is passed or otherwise transferred to an image processing means 136. Image processing means 136 comprises a processor dedicated to performing various programmable operations on the image signals supplied thereto or application specific integrated circuitry adapted to provide various image processing features as described for example by US-A-5 608 821.

Included in image processing means 136 is a halftoning circuit 140 that operates on m -level input signals to produce an n -level output signal for each color separation, where n is less than m , and where n is typically one bit per pixel per color. Further details of the operation of halftoning circuit 140 are described with respect to Figure 2 below. The halftoned image signals (C' , M' , Y' , and K') are then passed to an image output terminal 144 represented in Figure 1 as an image-on-image (I-O-I) system. Once received by the image output terminal, the halftoned image data is employed to control the placement of colorants on a substrate passing therethrough to render hard copy output 148.

Turning next to Figure 11, depicted therein is an exemplary image-on-image printing system. As described with respect to Figure 1, the color copy process typically involves a computer generated color image which may be conveyed to an image processor 136, or alternatively a color document 72 may be placed on the surface of a transparent platen 73. A scanning assembly 124, having a light source 74 illuminates the color document 72. The light reflected from document 72 is reflected by mirrors 75, 76, and 77, through lenses (not shown) and a dichroic prism 78 to three charge-coupled linear photosensing devices (CCDs) 79 where the information is read. Each CCD 79 outputs a digital image signal the level of which is proportional to the intensity of the incident light. The digital signals represent each pixel and are indicative of blue, green, and red densities. They are conveyed to the IPU 136 where they are converted into color separations and bit maps, typically representing yellow, cyan, magenta, and black. IPU 136 stores the bit maps for further instructions from an electronic subsystem (ESS) 80. The ESS is preferably a self-contained, dedicated minicomputer having a central processor unit (CPU), electronic storage, and a display or user interface (UI). The ESS is the control system which prepares and manages the image data flow between IPU 136 and image input terminal 122, 124, as well as being the main multi-tasking processor for operating all of the other machine subsystems and printing operations to be described hereinafter. The printing operations include imaging, developing, sheet delivery and transfer, and var-

ious functions associated with subsequent finishing processes. Some or all of these subsystems may have micro-controllers that communicate with the ESS 80.

The printing machine employs a photoreceptor 10 in the form of a belt having a photoconductive surface layer 11 on an electroconductive substrate 13. Preferably the surface 11 is made from an organic photoconductive material, although numerous photoconductive surfaces and conductive substrates may be employed. The belt 10 is driven by means of motor 20 having an encoder attached thereto (not shown) to generate a machine timing clock. Photoreceptor 10 moves along a path defined by rollers 14, 18, and 16 in a counter-clockwise direction as shown by arrow 12.

Initially, a photoreceptor 10 passes through charging station A where a corona generating device, indicated generally by the reference numeral 22, charges photoreceptor 10 to a relatively high, substantially uniform potential. Next, the charged portion of photoreceptor 10 is advanced through an imaging station B. At imaging station B, the uniformly charged belt 10 is exposed to the scanning device 24 which causes the photoreceptor to be discharged in accordance with the output from the scanning device. The scanning device is a laser Raster Output Scanner (ROS). The ROS creates the image in a series of parallel scan lines having a certain resolution, generally referred to as lines per inch. Scanning device 24 may include a laser with rotating polygon mirror blocks and a suitable modulator, or in lieu thereof, a light emitting diode array (LED) write bar positioned adjacent the photoreceptor 10.

At a first development station C, a magnetic brush developer unit, indicated generally by the reference numeral 26 advances developer material 31 into contact with the latent image and latent target marks. Developer unit 26 has a plurality of magnetic brush roller members. These magnetic brush rollers transport negatively charged black toner material to the latent image for development thereof. Power supply 32 electrically biases developer unit 26.

At recharging station D, a pair of corona recharge devices 36 and 37 are employed for adjusting the voltage level of both the toned and untoned areas on photoreceptor 10 to a substantially uniform level. A power supply is coupled to each of the electrodes of corona recharge devices 36 and 37. Recharging devices 36 and 37 substantially eliminate any voltage difference between toned areas and bare untoned areas, as well as to reduce the level of residual charge remaining on the previously toned areas, so that subsequent development of different color toner images is effected across a uniform development field.

Imaging devices 38, 53, and 63 are used to superimpose subsequent images by selectively discharging the recharged photoreceptor. These imaging devices may include, for example, a LED image array bar, or another ROS. One skilled in the art will appreciate that the operation of imaging devices 38, 53, and 63 are also

controlled by ESS 80. Moreover, one skilled in the art will recognize that those areas developed with black toner will not be subjected to sufficient light from the imaging devices to discharge the photoreceptor region lying below the black toner particles. However, this is of no concern as there is little likelihood of a need to deposit other colors over the black regions.

Imaging device 38 records a second electrostatic latent image on photoreceptor 10. A negatively charged developer material 40, for example, one including yellow toner, develops the second latent image. The toner is contained in a developer unit 42 disposed at a second developer station E and is transported to the second latent image recorded on the photoreceptor by a donor roll. A power supply (not shown) electrically biases the developer unit to develop this latent image with the negatively charged yellow toner particles 40. As will be further appreciated by those skilled in the art, the yellow colorant is deposited immediately subsequent to the black so that further colors that are additive to yellow, and interact therewith to produce the available color gamut, can be exposed through the yellow toner layer.

At a second recharging station F, a pair of corona recharge devices 51 and 52 are employed for adjusting the voltage level of both the toned and untoned areas on photoreceptor 10 to a substantially uniform level. A power supply is coupled to each of the electrodes of corona recharge devices 51 and 52. The recharging devices 51 and 52 substantially eliminate any voltage difference between toned areas and bare untoned areas, as well as to reduce the level of residual charge remaining on the previously toned areas so that subsequent development of different color toner images is effected across a uniform development field. A third latent image is then recorded on photoreceptor 10 by imaging device 53. This image is developed using a third color toner 55 contained in a developer unit 57 disposed at a third developer station G. An example of a suitable third color toner is magenta. Suitable electrical biasing of the developer unit 57 is provided by a power supply, not shown.

At a third recharging station H, a pair of corona recharge devices 61 and 62 adjust the voltage level of both the toned and untoned areas on photoreceptor 10 to a substantially uniform level. A power supply is coupled to each of the electrodes of corona recharge devices 61 and 62. The recharging devices 61 and 62 substantially eliminate any voltage difference between toned areas and bare untoned areas as well as to reduce the level of residual charge remaining on the previously toned areas, so that subsequent development of different color toner images is effected across a uniform development field. A fourth latent image is created using imaging device 63. The fourth latent image is formed on both bare areas and previously toned areas of photoreceptor 10 that are to be developed with the fourth color image. This image is developed, for example, using a cyan color toner 65 contained in developer unit 67 at a fourth devel-

oper station I. Suitable electrical biasing of the developer unit 67 is provided by a power supply, not shown.

Developer units 42, 57, and 67 are preferably of the type known in the art which do not interact, or are only marginally interactive with previously developed images. For examples, a DC jumping development system, a powder cloud development system, or a sparse, non-contacting magnetic brush development system are each suitable for use in an image on image color development system as described herein.

In order to condition the toner for effective transfer to a substrate, a negative pre-transfer corotron member 50 negatively charges all toner particles to the required negative polarity to ensure proper subsequent transfer.

During the exposure and development of the color image on the photoconductor, a sheet of support material is advanced to transfer station J by a sheet feeding apparatus 30. During simplex operation (single sided copy), a blank sheet may be fed from tray 15 or tray 17, or a high capacity tray 44 thereunder, to a registration transport 21, in communication with controller 81, where the sheet is registered in the process and lateral directions, and for skew position. One skilled in the art will realize that trays 15, 17, and 44 each hold a different sheet type. The speed of the sheet is adjusted at registration transport 21 so that the sheet arrives at transfer station J in synchronization with the image on the surface of photoconductive belt 10. Registration transport 21 receives a sheet from either a vertical transport 23 or a high capacity tray transport 25 and moves the received sheet to a pretransfer baffle 27. The vertical transport 23 receives the sheet from either tray 15 or tray 17, or the single-sided copy from duplex tray 28, and guides it to the registration transport 21 via a turn baffle 29. Sheet feeders 35 and 39 respectively advance a copy sheet from trays 15 and 17 to the vertical transport 23 by chutes 41 and 43. The high capacity tray transport 25 receives the sheet from tray 44 and guides it to the registration transport 21 via a lower baffle 45. A sheet feeder 46 advances copy sheets from tray 44 to transport 25 by a chute 47.

The pretransfer baffle 27 guides the sheet from the registration transport 21 to transfer station J. Charge limiter 49 located on pretransfer baffle 27 restricts the amount of electrostatic charge a sheet can place on the baffle 27 thereby reducing image quality problems and shock hazards. The charge can be placed on the baffle from either the movement of the sheet through the baffle or by the corona generating devices located at transfer station J. When the charge exceeds a threshold limit, charge limiter 49 discharges the excess to ground.

Transfer station J includes a transfer corona device 54 which provides positive ions to the backside of the copy sheet. This attracts the negatively charged toner powder images from photoreceptor belt 10 to the sheet. A detach corona device 56 is provided for facilitating stripping of the sheet from belt 10.

A sheet-to-image registration detector 110 is located

in the gap between the transfer and corona devices 54 and 56 to sense variations in actual sheet to image registration and provides signals indicative thereof to ESS 80 and controller 81 while the sheet is still tacked to photoreceptor belt 10. After transfer, the sheet continues to move, in the direction of arrow 58, onto a conveyor 59 that advances the sheet to fusing station K.

Fusing station K includes a fuser assembly, indicated generally by the reference numeral 60, which permanently fixes the transferred color image to the copy sheet. Preferably, fuser assembly 60 comprises a heated fuser roller 109 and a backup or pressure roller 113. The copy sheet passes between fuser roller 109 and backup roller 113 with the toner powder image contacting fuser roller 109. In this manner, the multi-color toner powder image is permanently fixed to the sheet. After fusing, chute 66 guides the advancing sheet to feeder 68 for exit to a finishing module (not shown) via output 64. However, for duplex operation, the sheet is reversed in position at inverter 70 and transported to duplex tray 28 via chute 69. Duplex tray 28 temporarily collects the sheet whereby sheet feeder 33 then advances it to the vertical transport 23 via chute 34. The sheet fed from duplex tray 28 receives an image on the second side thereof, at transfer station J, in the same manner as the image was deposited on the first side thereof. The completed duplex copy exits to the finishing module (not shown) via output 64.

After the sheet of support material is separated from photoreceptor 10, the residual toner carried on the photoreceptor surface is removed therefrom. The toner is removed at cleaning station L using a cleaning brush structure contained in a housing 108.

Having described the operation of the image-on-image printing system, attention is now turned to the operation of the halftoning circuit 140. Referring to Figure 2, halftoning circuit 140 is schematically illustrated. In one embodiment, the halftoning circuit produces a rotated dot halftone screen based upon the halftone screen stored as indicated by screen matrix 156, the rotated dot screen being applied to the most visually perceptible colorants (e.g., black, cyan and magenta), while a non-periodic halftone operation is applied to the yellow color separation. In particular, the screen matrix supplies a rotated dot data to periodic halftoning block 150. At block 150, the various thresholds associated with, for example, a 45° screen are applied or compared against the incoming color separation data (K) and the output is an *n*-bit value indicating whether the color data was above or below the threshold for the halftone cell location. While *n* may represent a multi-bit output, it will be represented herein as a binary value, indicating whether a black output pixel will be exposed or left unexposed at a corresponding location on the output image. A method for the efficient production of variable angle screen cells by a screen matrix, and a corresponding representation scheme, is provided in US-A-4 149 194. Similarly, the output image data is generated for the ma-

genta and cyan output images at blocks 154 and 158 respectively employing 75° and 15° screen rotation angles.

Also shown in Figure 2 is the non-periodic processing of the yellow or least perceptible color separation data. As represented by non-periodic halftone processing block 152, the yellow separation data is processed using either error diffusion or random screen techniques so as to reduce any periodic structure in the yellow image upon output. The error diffusion is accomplished, for example, by the process described in US-A-5 608 821 or by US-A-5 353 127.

Again, although the present embodiment is described with respect to a binary output image, it is possible for both the number of output levels n for the halftoned color separations to be greater than 2, and for the error diffused separation to be greater than 2 as well. Moreover, the present embodiment contemplates further that the number of possible output levels for the non-period output (n_n) could be different than the number of output levels for the periodic output (n_p) such as by being greater than or equal to n_p or by being less than n_p . As an example, consider a partial pixel exposure possibility for a high addressability printing system. In error diffusion, a requirement may be imposed on the high addressability system to only output full pixels, as opposed to partial pixel exposure, while for the periodic or screened output a 4x addressability may be employed (e.g., each pixel has four subpixels that may be controlled independently). This aspect is important because error diffusion generates isolated dots; if the dots are too small they will not be "stable" when output by a xerographic printing system and process variation will result in color shifts. Using only full dots for the error diffused pixels improves stability over the 4x sub-pixels. Moreover, because the yellow or least visually perceptible color is imaged using the non-periodic imaging technique, any worms or noise resulting from the non-periodic technique are not visible. For added stability, it is also possible to require the error diffused or non-periodic output to be done in two or more pixel clusters as a minimum non-periodic "dot" size.

While the use of error diffusion is often believed to be the source of noise in an output image, the use of error diffusion for the yellow color separation results in noise that is significantly less noticeable and therefore of less concern. Accordingly, a simple error diffusion technique, such as that proposed by Floyd and Steinberg, "An Adaptive Algorithm for Spatial Greyscale", Proceedings of the SID, 17/2, pp. 75-77 (1976) may be employed. Alternatively, the non-periodic processing block can employ circuitry capable of applying a random, or at least very large period, screen to the color separation data. Here again it should be appreciated that because the visual perception of the yellow colorant is relatively small simple random screening processes may be employed. Having processed each of the associated pixels for the four color separations, the resulting

data is then delayed by delay blocks 160, 170, or 180 so as to maintain the registration of the image pixels when exposed or otherwise rendered on the image output terminal.

Turning now to Figures 3 - 10, the advantages of the technique described above are further illustrated. In Figures 3 - 10, black printing on a white background has been employed to represent either a single color separation or the combination of two color separations. It will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the resultant black and white rendition of the two-color images is not as visually pleasing or artifact free as an actual two-color print would be, however the figures are believed to be illustrative of the advantages of the technique nonetheless. In particular, Figures 3, 4 and 5 respectively represent cyan, magenta and yellow color separations processed using 15, 75 and 90 degree rotated dot halftoning operations. It will also be appreciated that the figures provide merely one example of screen angle combinations and that other screen angle combinations (e.g., different colors at the same angles, or separation angles rotated by an equivalent amount) give rise to similar effects and are, therefore, capable of correction.

The effects of moiré arising from combining the individual separations of Figures 3, 4 and 5 are further illustrated in Figures 6 and 7. In particular, Figure 6 illustrates the beating that arises between the cyan and yellow separations when there is only an approximately 15° angle between the screen angles used to produce the separations. Similarly, Figure 7 illustrates the two-color moiré that arises between the yellow and magenta color separations when processed in accordance with typical halftone operations.

Figure 8 illustrates the yellow color separation when processed in accordance with the above technique. In particular, the yellow separation was processed using a simple error diffusion technique as described with respect to non-periodic halftone block 152 in Figure 2. For purposes of comparison, the yellow color separation of Figure 8 can be combined with the cyan and magenta separations of Figures 3 and 4 to illustrate the improved rendition, and elimination of artifacts, in the two-color combinations. Specifically, Figure 9 represents the two-color separations of cyan and yellow, where yellow is the least perceptible colorant and is processed using a non-periodic rendering technique. Similarly, Figure 10 represents the two-color combination of magenta and yellow, again having the yellow separation processed using the error diffusion technique previously described. As the result of a comparison of Figure 6 with Figure 9 or Figure 7 with Figure 10, it will be appreciated by even the casual observer that Figures 9 and 10 lack the structural interaction (moiré) found in the other figures. Accordingly, the processing of the least visually perceptible color separation reduces the likelihood of two-color moiré. Furthermore, the use of such a process expands the latitude of the printing system. To print the halftone dot of one color, say cyan, over the dots of the yellow color

separation requires tight control of the xerographic parameters. If the cyan dot is only slightly broken when it is developed on top of the yellow dot, a two-color moire is likely to appear using conventional halftoning methods. However, use of the method and apparatus described herein, a slight imperfection of the cyan dot when placed over a yellow dot is much less likely to cause a visible artifact to appear. Thus, as a result of the above technique the latitude of xerographic or other marking processes can be significantly increased.

In recapitulation, the present invention provides a method and apparatus that can reduce two-color moire often found during the rendering of full color images using halftoning techniques. The techniques can apply a non-periodic halftone operation to the least perceptible color separation (e.g., yellow) so as to prevent the formation of periodic structures due to the interaction of the yellow colorant with one of the other colorants (e.g., cyan or magenta).

It is, therefore, apparent that there has been provided a method and apparatus for the rendition of full color images without perceptible structuring within the image due to the interactions between two primary colors employed to render the image. While the invention has been described in conjunction with embodiments thereof, many alternatives, modifications, and variations will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Accordingly, it is intended to embrace all such alternatives, modifications and variations that fall within the broad scope of the appended claims.

Claims

1. A method for producing multiple color images, comprising:

obtaining image signals defining color separations that describe a multiple color image, the image signals indicating optical density with m levels; the color separations including first and second color separations indicating optical densities of first and second colors respectively;

performing non-periodic reduction on the image signals defining the first color separation to produce a non-periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the first color separation with n_n levels, where m is greater than n_n ;

performing periodic reduction on the image signals defining the second color separation to produce a periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the second color separation with n_p levels, where m is greater than n_p ; and

providing an output pattern for each of the color separations to an image output device (144) to cause the image output device to produce a version of the multiple color image (148); the

output patterns including the non-periodic output pattern and the periodic output pattern;

characterised in that the first color is less perceptible than the second color.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein said first color separation indicates optical density of yellow.

3. The method of claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the color separations further include third and fourth separations, the second, third and fourth separations indicating optical densities of cyan, magenta and black, respectively; the method further comprising:

performing periodic reduction on the image signals defining the third and fourth color separations to produce periodic output patterns indicating optical density in the third and fourth color separations with n_p levels.

4. The method of any preceding claim, wherein said first color separation is imaged at a 90° angle of rotation and wherein the second color separation is imaged at an angles of rotation of 15°, 45°, or 75°.

5. The method of any preceding claim, wherein the image output device is a printer; the colorant associated with the first color separation being deposited by the printer prior to the deposition of the colorant associated with the second color separation.

6. The method of any preceding claim, wherein the step of performing non-periodic reduction comprises applying a non-periodic image processing operation to the image signals, the image processing operation selected from a set of image processing operations including:

error diffusion;
stochastic screening; and
pulse density modulation.

7. An apparatus for producing multiple color images, comprising:

a source of image signals defining color separations that describe a multiple color image, the image signals indicating optical density with m levels; the color separations including first and second color separations indicating optical densities of first and second colors respectively;

processing means for performing reduction on the image signals, the processing means performing non-periodic reduction on the image signals defining the first color separation to produce a non-periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the first color separation with

n_n levels, where m is greater than n_n ; the processing means performing periodic reduction on the image signals defining the second color separation to produce a periodic output pattern indicating optical density in the second color separation with n_p levels, where m is greater than n_p ; and an image output device (144) for producing a version of the multiple color image (148) in response to a set of output patterns that includes an output pattern for each of the color separations; the set of output patterns including the non-periodic output pattern and the periodic output pattern;

characterised in that the first color is less perceptible than the second color.

8. The apparatus of claim 7 in which the image output device is an image-on-image printing system capable of rendering each of the colors with n output density levels in superposed positions on a substrate to produce selected colors, where n is greater than n_n and n_p .
9. The apparatus of claim 7 or claim 8, wherein said first separation is a yellow separation.
10. The apparatus of any of claims 7 to 9, in which the source of image signals is an image input terminal that provides digitized image signals describing an image of a color document.

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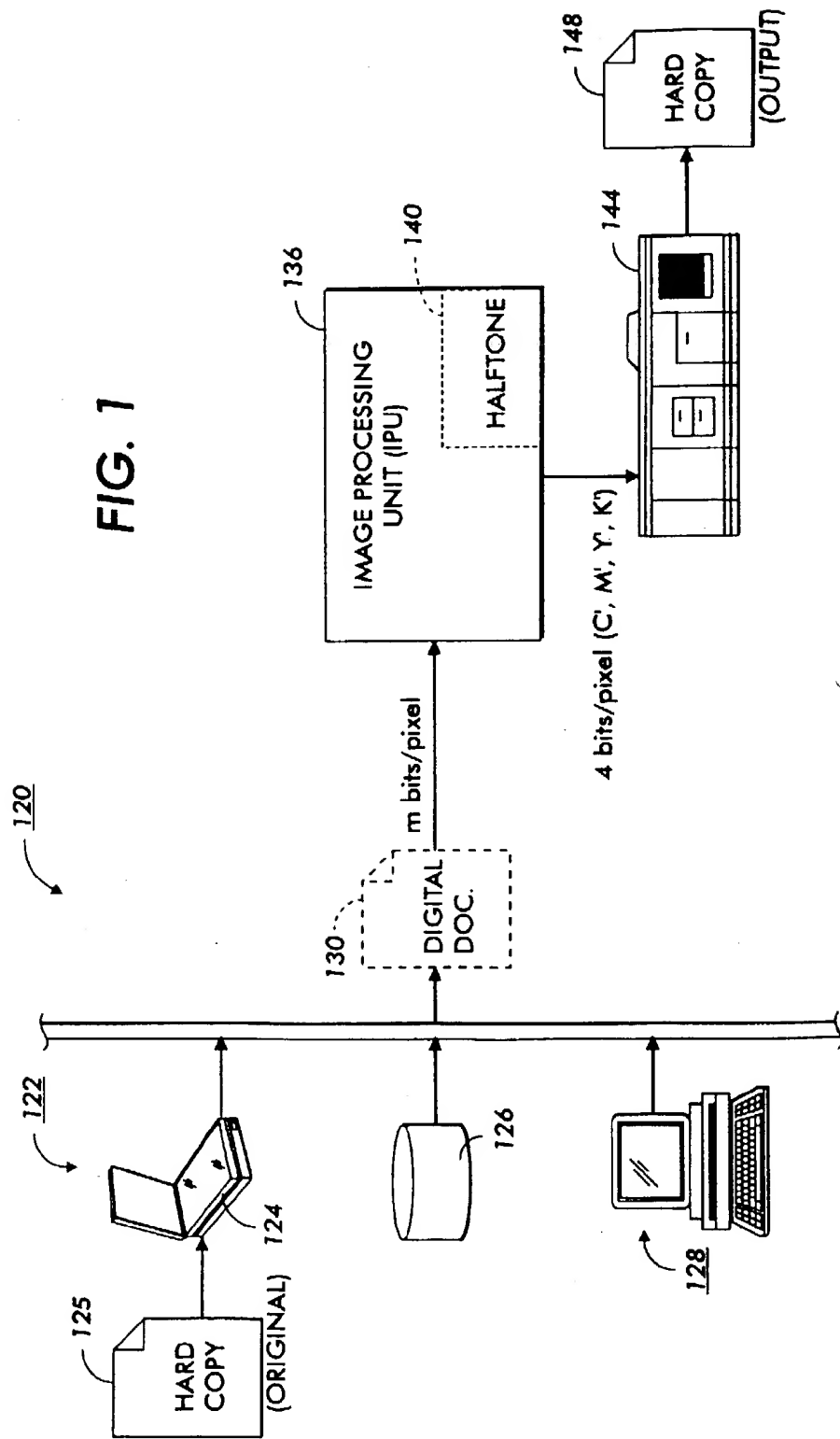
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50

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FIG. 1



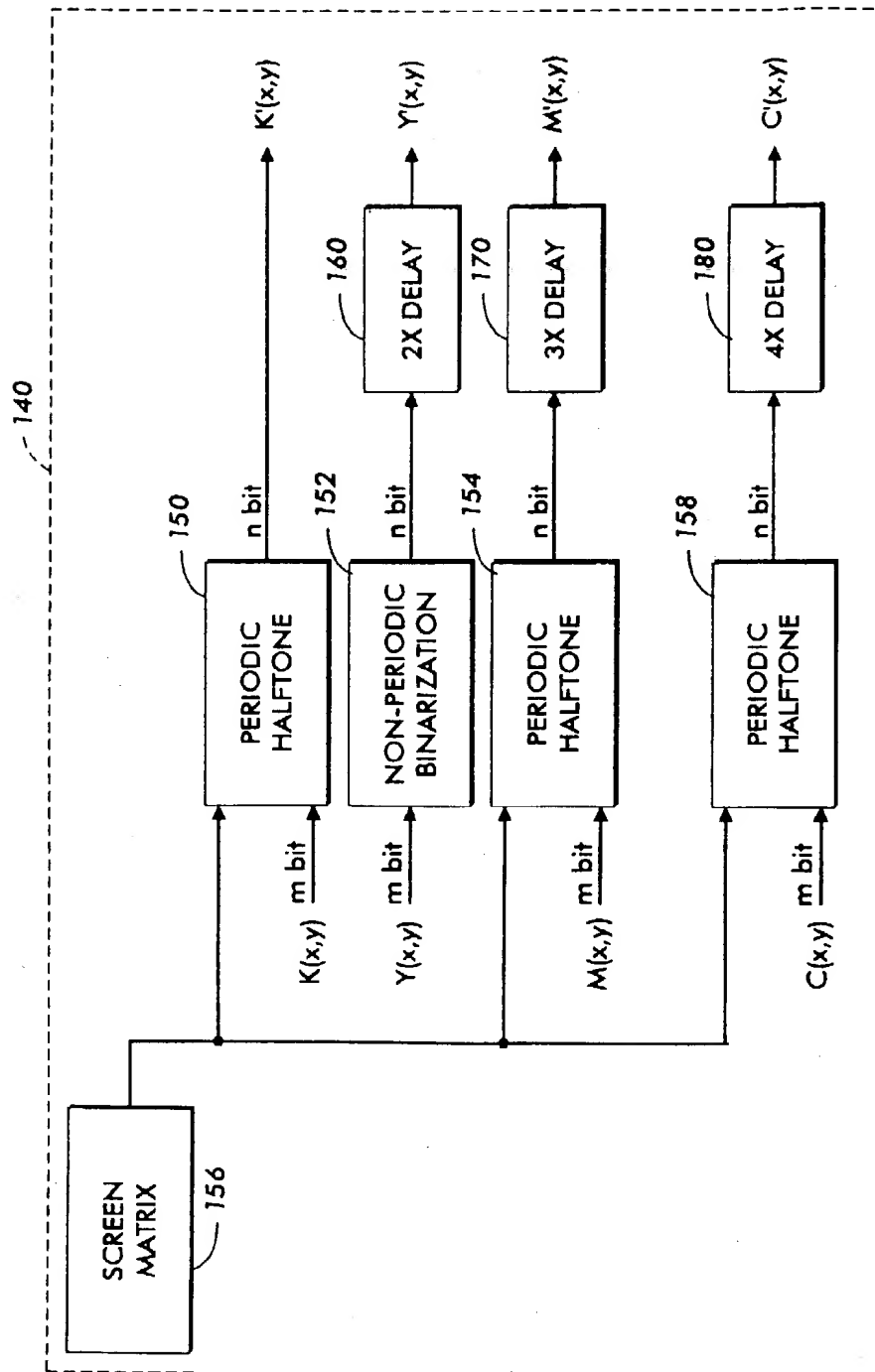


FIG. 2

FIG. 3

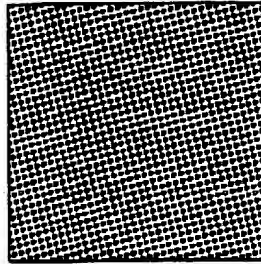


FIG. 4

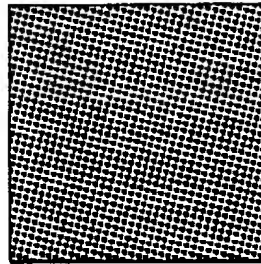


FIG. 5

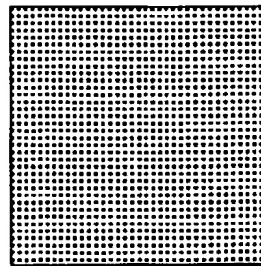


FIG. 6

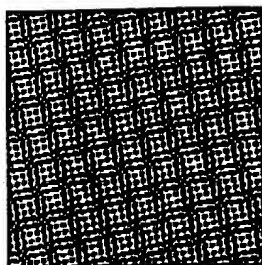


FIG. 7

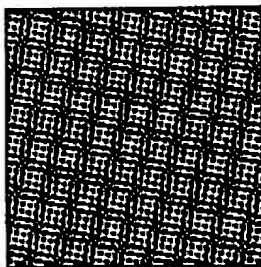


FIG. 8

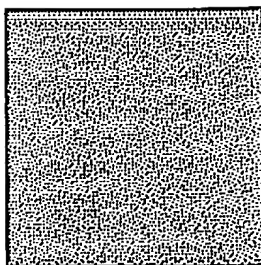


FIG. 9

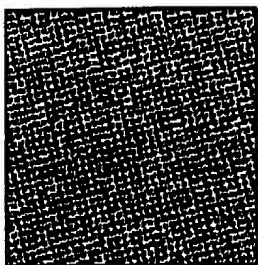
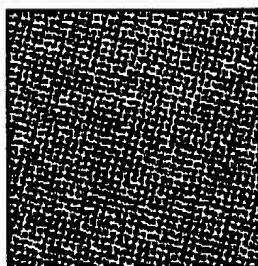


FIG. 10



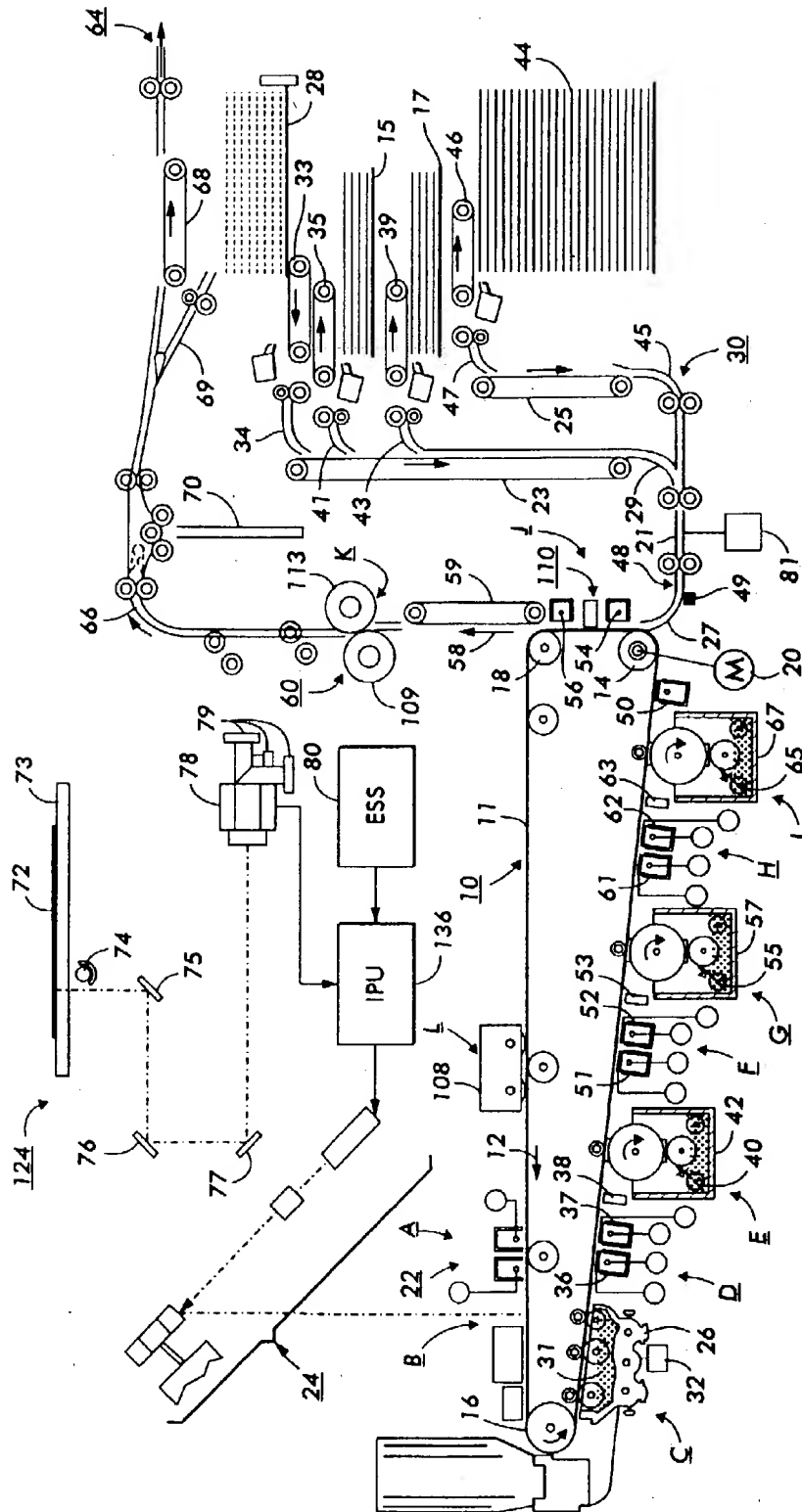


FIG. 11



European Patent
Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 97 30 4784

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.6)
D,A	US 5 394 252 A (T. M. HOLLADAY ET AL.) * the whole document *	1,3-8,10	H04N1/52
P,A	EP 0 725 533 A (EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY) 7 August 1996 * the whole document *	1-3,6-10	
A	US 4 680 625 A (HISASHI SHOJI ET AL.) * column 9, line 52 - column 10, line 19 *	5	
			TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.6)
			H04N
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 7 October 1997	Examiner De Roeck, A
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons S : member of the same patent family, corresponding document			

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